

Revelation Of The Great 'I AM'

Perspectives On The Gospel Of John

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Chapter 10

The New Birth - John 3:1-21

¹"There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him. ³Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"

¹⁰Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? ¹¹Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁶For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

¹⁸"He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹But, he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God."

Jesus is about to embark on a theological discourse with a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, who only feels comfortable coming to Jesus under the cloak of darkness. Nicodemus means, "Victor of people"¹ and he is definitely a man of importance in the Sanhedrin. He is

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certainly curious, but he does not want to be seen by his peers, so he comes by night. Out of the darkness of his life and religiosity, Nicodemus came to the Light of the world. As is so often the case John possibly had multiple associations in mind here.² Nicodemus heard all about Jesus and His teachings and admits Jesus is from God as the signs He performs attest. At the outset, Nicodemus testifies to the significance of the signs. However, is he sincere, or is he only patronizing Jesus? He addresses Jesus as Rabbi, but he does not really come in faith; maybe he has been sent to check Jesus out as his comment implies when he says, "*we know*."³ Had he come of his own volition he would have said, "*I know*." We also need to remember whilst people referred to Jesus as a teacher, He did not take the usual path to becoming one. He did not sit under a great teacher, He was not educated in the Rabbinical system, in fact, He was better known for His humble beginnings and His carpentry skills.

Before we delve into this passage it would be good to note John's use of the water motif, and how he employs it as a metaphor for the Spirit (Is.44:3). The Holy Spirit was understood by the Essenes as a purifying agent (Ez.36:25), the Pharisees saw the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of prophecy, or revelation, through God's prophets (2Pet.1:20-21). Jesus will show that the Spirit is given to any who believe in Him. Let us observe a pattern that John develops, in regards to water, tradition, and freedom in the Spirit, which Jesus gives. There is a transition of understanding in John from the natural to the spiritual, from the temporary to the everlasting, and from bondage to freedom:

- The Baptist contrasts his water baptism for repentance, to that of Jesus' baptism with the Spirit; it is the same water, same act, given a different meaning (1:31-33).
- Wedding at Cana, there were 6 stone water jugs for ritual purification, however, when Jesus changed them into wine this was a sign of the Messianic age, where the Spirit of God would be given freely and in abundance (2:6-11).
- Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born of water and the Spirit and is surprised that Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel, does not grasp this issue of being born again (3:5).
- The Samaritan woman, who met Jesus at Jacob's well to draw water, a place which held traditional significance. She is invited

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to drink of living water, which Jesus makes clear is the Spirit (4:10).

- Jesus stands up at a strategic moment at the Feast of Tabernacles during the water libation ceremony,⁴ when the priest takes a cup of water from the Pool of Siloam and pours it over the altar and declares that if anyone is thirsty to come to Him. Again out of Him then shall flow living water, the Holy Spirit (7:37, 39).
- The Pool of Siloam, which was nothing more than a natural spring, when the Son of God sent the blind man to wash in the pool, this water had healing ability (9:1-7).

All Jewish people carried out Jewish baptism or ritual immersion,⁵ not just once, but often. On a recent tour, I had the privilege to lead through Israel in 2011; one of the many archeological sites in Jerusalem we visited was the Herodian Quarter, The Rich Man's House. Our guide Hillel Geva had been personally involved in the excavations of this beautiful home.⁶ This house has beautifully decorated rooms, frescoed and stuccoed walls, with richly colored mosaic floors, and a *Mikvah*, where the family could cleanse themselves before going to the Temple. It is of the utmost importance that the water in the *Mikvah* is running flowing water from a stream, not still water poured in by a bucket. The water from a stream is considered living water and is the only water suitable for ritual immersion.

However, it becomes even more interesting when you understand Proselyte⁷ baptism, and the implications of that within Jewish thinking, to which Pryor devotes a lengthy discussion. A Proselyte is one who is not of Jewish ancestry but wishes to convert to the Jewish faith. Immersion for a proselyte was significant both sociologically and religiously. If they are male, they would need to be circumcised, offer a sacrifice and then be immersed in a *Mikvah*; a woman would only need to offer a sacrifice along with immersion. Once they have done these things they are considered a son, a follower of Abraham the first proselyte and father of the Jewish nation. The understanding is that when the proselyte comes out of the water they are '*born again*,' they are legally and socially considered Jewish. They are deemed dead as to their paternal heritage and literally a new person through this ritual. They have a new family, a new heritage, a new life. This, however, had its limitations, considered primarily a forensic

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transformation, rather than a spiritual one. It fulfilled legal and social obligations but was not efficacious for spiritual transformation.⁸ This will prove to be the contrast that Jesus will present to Nicodemus.

In the third bullet point, we mentioned that Nicodemus is an esteemed teacher of Israel, and seems to have no idea what Jesus is talking about. His response is "*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?*" The language of being born again to Nicodemus' mind is the language of proselyte conversion through water baptism. Why would one who is already an Israelite by birth, an elite ruler in Israel, no less, need to be born again? This is a preposterous thought, hence, Nicodemus' comment shifts to a natural birth. Jesus is showing Nicodemus a parallel in that being born of the Spirit will bring about change, not only in the forensic sense but also in the spiritual sense.⁹ The term '*from above*' is a synonym for '*born of God*' clearly indicating this is something from God and not of an earthly, fleshly¹⁰ origin. We remember that John as Jesus is using water as a metaphor for Spirit. The issue is not the water but the Spirit. Jesus concludes in His comment, "*So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.*" Jesus is not offering ritual baptism in water; He is offering Spirit baptism, which will result in spiritual transformation.

The work that the Spirit does is unseen; it takes place in secret, in the inner being of the person. It is a mystery like the wind, you cannot see it, you cannot see where it comes from, but its effects are evident.¹¹ There will need to be change if you come to Jesus, but that change is empowered through the Holy Spirit. It is not about externals; it is about the inner person. The book of Acts will highlight this very well. Wherever the Spirit was given, those who received were transformed. Peter went from being a vacillating fisherman to a man who preached with radical boldness. 3,000 people were converted by his first sermon. The Apostle Paul saw the Holy Spirit as essential to the Christian walk (Rom.8:14-17; Gal.3:2-3; 1Cor.2:10-14; 6:11; Titus 3:5). One of the themes that permeate this Gospel is the giving of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit leads, teaches and draws us. The book of Acts follows on with the bestowing of the Holy Spirit; given in abundant supply at Pentecost which subsequently birthed and empowered the Church (Acts 2).

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When we are born again as believers in Christ, we too enter into a new family, we receive a new identity, we are dead to our sin and made alive in Christ (Rom.6:11; Gal.2:19; Eph.2:1-5; Col.2:13). The Spirit of God works deep within us and creates within us a new nature. We become the temple of the living God. The very same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead and parted the Red Sea now indwells us and transforms us into the image of Christ. The miracle of the new birth is a gift from God not apprehended through natural understanding.

The importance of testimony arises again, when Jesus says, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness."* Some understand the passage to speak of those that bore witness to Him and walked with Him in His ministry, like the Baptist. They spoke what they knew, had seen, and they believed. Others believe this passage speaks of those that bore witness from heaven, the Father and the Holy Spirit (1Jn.5:1). The Father was with Him (Mk.1:10-11), the Spirit of the Lord was upon Him (Matt.4:18); therefore, He speaks here in a plurality of number.¹² One thing is true; someone who does not want to believe will not receive His witness. This will happen often in spite of the signs and heavenly confirmation. Earthly-minded people cannot receive heavenly-minded wisdom.¹³ Regardless of people rejecting His testimony, this will not dampen His resolve to fulfill the plan of God for humanity. When people reject our testimony they are in fact rejecting Jesus Christ Himself as though He were standing there in person extending the invitation. We cannot allow this to dampen our resolve to bear witness to Him, in this darkened world.

Jesus next makes an interesting comment that will take Nicodemus' mind back to the Old Testament. Remember, the Old Testament is in the New revealed, and the New is in the Old concealed. This is one reason why it is imperative, when we give Bibles to new Christians, that we give them the whole book, not just a copy of the New Testament. To do so is to give people 1/2 the story, like getting a book, ripping it 1/2 and expecting the reader to understand all that has gone before. The Bible from beginning to end is an integrated whole and should not be separated.

Jesus says to Nicodemus, *"No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven."*¹⁴ And

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as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." According to Messianic understanding what Jesus is doing here is falling back on the greatest teaching about the Messiah; of Him ascending and descending, and the least teaching; of Moses and the bronze serpent lifted in the wilderness. Proverbs 30:4, states that there would come one, the Son, who will ascend into heaven and descend (Eph.4:7-10). John has started out letting us know that the Word was with God in heaven and descended to earth,¹⁴ to dwell with humanity, and in the preceding chapter, Jesus declared that He would in fact die and ascend back to where He came from. This pattern was the same with Moses. He ascended to the Mountain to hear from God, and then descended from there to bring the very words of God to the people. Now Jesus has come from the mountain of God, heaven, and declared to us not only who God is, but delivered His very words (Jn.5ff; 6:57; 8:28), and He will refer to this throughout John's Gospel.¹⁵

The lesser teaching is that of Moses and the fiery serpents in the passage in Numbers 21:4-9. There, we find the Israelites murmuring and complaining about the fact that they are in the wilderness, sick of manna the very provision of God, and so the LORD sends serpents amongst the people and they die from their bites. God instructs Moses as he intercedes for the people to make a serpent out of bronze, set it upon on a pole and as the people look up to it they will be healed. This is a typology of Jesus' death lifted up on a pole or cross, and all who look to Him will be saved. Jesus has interceded for humanity to bring all who believe eternal life.

Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, I am the One spoken of in the Old Testament, the coming One, not merely a Rabbi, a teacher, but the Messiah, as He applies these Old Testament passages to Himself. He is not covert about this; He explicitly states it in the following verses, "*that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*"¹⁶ *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*"¹⁷ *For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.*"¹⁸ *He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*"¹⁹ *And this is the condemnation, that the light*

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has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹But, he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God."

Nicodemus came under the cloak of darkness to go unnoticed. He stated at the outset knowing who Jesus was, but mental ascent would not be sufficient. Before Jesus is finished with him, he would understand that he needed to "believe" and that belief would need to be translated into action. He needed to come out of the darkness into the light; quiet curiosity would need to be transformed into a public confession. The expression

"eternal life"(zoē aiōnios),¹⁶ which appears 17 times in this Gospel, is used here for the first time. John's Gospel does not offer the world a superficial idea of the love of God in salvation. The verbs for "loved" (ēgapēsen) and "gave" (edōken) here express the genuine self-giving nature of God in having sent, His "only Son" (monogenous huiou) on an unrepeatable mission into the world (3:16; 1:14, 18).¹⁷

Jesus says that His role at that time was not to bring judgment, but that does not mean that judgment will not take place in the future. Jesus uses the language of the Prologue, light and darkness, which stand in antithesis to each other; there is no common ground. John is quite dualistic in his writings, very black and white, as is Jesus in the way He speaks; there is no straddling the fence. To choose Jesus is to choose life, to reject Jesus is to choose death; choices evidenced through one's works.¹⁸ In this post-modern age, the centrality of Jesus to the salvation message must not be diluted; *He is The Way, He is The Only Way*. All roads may lead to Rome, but not all paths lead to Christ.

Three times for emphasis in this passage Jesus will use the double Amen; signifying that what He says is doubly faithful; designed to silence any doubt or objection to His words. He will say that in relation to the need to be born again in order to participate in the Kingdom of God¹⁹ (3). He will say it again in relation to being born of water and Spirit (5), and He will say it to highlight the truthfulness of His words, which they refuse to receive as His witness (11). There is no mistake in His comments; He is redefining all their previously held assumptions.

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NOTES

¹ “Nicodemus” The name means conqueror of the people νίκη, victory, and δῆμος, people, though some give it a Hebrew derivation meaning *innocent blood*. Vincent, M. R., 2002: Jn.3:1.

² *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*, 2006: Jn.3:2.

³ “We know” οἶδαμεν. SECOND PERFECT INDICATIVE FIRST PERSON PLURAL. Assured conviction based on Jesus’ miracles. He seems to speak for others of his class as the blind man does in 9:31. Robertson, A., 1997: Jn.3:2; Vincent, M. R., 2002: Jn.3:2.

⁴ Water libation ceremony: Vamosh, M. F. (n.d.). *Daily Life At The Time Of Jesus*: 23.

⁵ Ritual immersion is referred to as *Mikveh*, pools that needed to contain at least 85 gallons of living, running, water, not a stagnant pool of water. Ibid: 26-27.

⁶ *Rich Man’s House*. Ibid: 38-39.

⁷ Maimonides in *Law of Moral Qualities VI.4*, makes the comment that the love of proselytes involves fulfilment of 2 distinct commandments given by God; whereby He expresses His love for them. He goes so far as to say that the proselyte is like the Jew in every way. Quoting Scholem, Israel carried out three rites to enter into covenant relationship with Yahweh, circumcision, sacrifice, and immersion along with accepting the yoke of Torah. Therefore should a Gentile wish to shelter under the wings of the *Shekinah* they must also accept along with the yoke of Torah, immersion, circumcision, and sacrifice, which he will be able to do once the Temple is rebuilt. Keller, M., 1991: 51-52; Scholem, G., 1941: 241-242.

⁸ Pryor, D. *Born Of The Water And Of The Spirit*. Centre of Judaic-Christian Studies. [Audio].

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “flesh” σάρξ, *sarx*, emphasizes merely the weakness and mortality of the creature - a neutral term, not necessarily sinful as in Paul. This is further confirmed by the reference in John 1:14 to the Logos becoming “flesh.” John avoids associating sinfulness with the incarnate Christ. *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*, 2006: Jn.3:6.

¹¹ “Pneuma” is used for both wind and spirit in the Greek. Tasker, R.V.G. (1983): 71. Interestingly Socrates (Xenophon’s “*Memorabilia*”), says, “The instruments of the deities you will likewise find imperceptible; for the thunder-bolt, for instance, though it is plain that it is sent from above, and works its will with everything with which it comes in contact, is yet never seen either approaching, or striking, or retreating; the winds, too, are themselves invisible, though their effects are evident to us, and we perceive their course.” Vincent, M. R., 2002: Jn.3:8.

¹² Henry, M., 1996: Jn.3:1-21.

¹³ “Heavenly things” τὰ ἐπουράνια. Not holy things as compared with sinful, nor spiritual things as compared with temporal; but things which are in heaven, mysteries of redemption, having their seat in the divine will, realized in the world through the work and death of Jesus Christ and the faith of humanity (14-16). Vincent, M. R., 2002: Jn.3:12.

¹⁴ “But he that descended out of heaven” εἰ μὴ ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβας. The Incarnation of the Pre-existent Son of God who was in heaven before He came down, knows what He is telling him about are “heavenly things.” Robertson, A., 1997: Jn.3:13.

¹⁵ Judah, M. *The Gospel of John*. Lion & Lamb Ministries. [Audio].

¹⁶ “eternal life” Greek term referred to quality, not quantity. Utley, R. J. D., 1999: 35.

¹⁷ Borchert, G. L., 1996: 182.

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¹⁸ “loved darkness” ἠγάπησαν το σκοτος. A common word for moral and spiritual darkness (IThess.5:5). *Darkness* is common in John as a metaphor for the state of sinners (8:12; 12:35, 46; IJn.1:6; 2:8, 9, 11). The pathos of it all, is that men fall in love with the darkness of sin and rebel against the light, like denizens of the underworld, for their works were evil πονηρα, When the light appears, they scatter to their holes and dens. Robertson, A., 1997: Jn.3:19.

¹⁹ John uses the word “kingdom” βασιλεία, 5x (3:3, 5; 18:36- 3x). Only here is it qualified with the phrase of God. The fact that John does not stress the concept of the kingdom of God does not mean it is absent from his theology. *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*, 2006: Jn.3:3.

FURTHER STUDY

Greek text of *The New Birth* passage 3:1-21

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